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University Preparation & Learning Disabilities

From the moment he received his first Lego set as a toddler, Adrian wanted to design and build things. Although he excelled at math and art in school, his reading and writing skills lagged significantly behind those of his classmates. Adrian's increasing frustration was a real concern to his parents and teachers. In Grade 3, his teacher recommended a Psychoeducational Assessment to understand just what was causing his learning struggle. Adrian was diagnosed with a learning disability which enabled his teacher to prepare an Individual Educational Plan (IEP), which described the accommodations needed to allow him to access the curriculum equally with his peers. As a result of these supports, Adrian blossomed throughout his elementary and high school years. Now in Grade 12, Adrian and his parents are exploring university and college programs, wondering whether students with specific learning needs can also be accommodated at the post-secondary level. The answer is "Yes."

Dr. William Ford, an educational psychologist who works with students with a broad range of learning differences, compares the need for accommodation to his need for 'glasses.' He says: "If you test my driving using a multiple choice test, but don't let me wear my glasses to read it, I'd fail!" That is, you'd be testing my *vision* and not my driving *knowledge*." This analogy also applies to learning in school. Students with learning disabilities need 'glasses' to compensate for the different ways in which they process information. In Adrian's case, his visual and verbal abilities were remarkable, but he was hampered by a weak working memory and a small motor weakness. The provision of extra time, access to a word processor and graphic organizers allowed him to build upon his strengths and compensate for his reading and writing difficulties.

Elementary and secondary schools in Ontario have been accommodating students with learning differences for more than two decades. Colleges and universities across Canada, the USA, and the UK also recognize that providing accommodations for timed exams, oral lectures, written essays, and reading to students with learning disabilities creates a level playing field. The definition of a learning disability states that the student must be of average or above average intelligence. What the student needs may be extra time to complete assignments, technological equipment, or different teaching strategies, such as alternative test-taking, note-taking, mentorship and other supports, all designed to help the student succeed. As these students graduate from high school, they face new challenges when it comes to post-secondary education. They still need their 'glasses,' but they must now also advocate for themselves by informing the administration and their professors what they need to reach their goals.

How does a student access post-secondary accommodations? The first step is to ensure that the student has had a recent *Diagnostic Psychoeducational Assessment* conducted by a registered psychologist. Most post-secondary institutions require that the student be assessed within three years before entrance. If the student has been previously assessed, an updated assessment is needed because developmental changes can affect a student's learning and academic abilities over time. University and college websites provide specific details in their descriptions of their accessibility or disability services on what is required in a comprehensive assessment.

Good planning is the key to the successful transition of a learning disabled student from high school to post-secondary studies. What is critical is that the student contact and register with the university or college's Disability/Accessibility Services as soon as possible, to ensure that services are in place when they start. Dr.

Ford recommends that the required assessment as well as career planning take part in Grade 10 or early in Grade 11 to help guide the student's post-secondary planning.

As for Adrian, he has already identified three universities and contacted their Accessibility Services. Moreover, he and his parents were delighted to learn that after graduation, all professional associations also provide eligible candidates with accommodations for their licencing examinations. Moreover, qualifying examinations for graduate programs (e.g., LSAT, SAT, etc.) also provide specific accommodations based on the diagnostic assessment. Adrian is now ready for his post-secondary adventure!!

Dr. Ford is an educational psychologist and the Director of Educational Connections, which specializes in assisting students in their post-secondary transition.